Tom Wardleigh

Oral History Interview
Tom Wardleigh
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Anchorage, Alaska
Interviewed by: Jim King

Jim: I am with Tom Wardleigh in his office at the Aviation Safety Foundation in Anchorage, Alaska. We are going to talk about some of the early days with the Fish and Wildlife Aviation Division.

Tom: Jim, I guess my first exposure to the Fish and Wildlife Service was perhaps the most unusual one of my whole career. I was working at Kenmore Air Harbor in Seattle and doing mechanical work and flying; mostly instructing with some charter work. We acquired an airplane for the State of Washington that they had damaged. In talking to their fish and game pilot, I asked him if there were any more jobs like he had. He said, "no, but there was a fellow in town from Alaska that sometimes hired pilots to come to Alaska and fly for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service." He gave me a telephone number and I called what was then the Montlake Laboratory and they said, "yes, this man Clarence Rhode was in Seattle and they would have him call me."

Pretty soon, I got this call and his concern was whether or not I could tune up radios. I told him that I could tune up some radios but that wasn't my specialty and that I was a licensed mechanic and a licensed pilot, current in Widgeons, CD's, Norseman's, Blanca's. He said he would like to talk to me in person. There was a pause in the conversation and then he said, "be at the Steward Hotel at 3:00 a.m. the next morning." He gave me a room. I could hardly believe this but if that was the deal, then that was the deal. I went down there and there was a line of folding chairs in the hallway and there were people waiting to get an interview with Clarence.

Finally I got in to chat with him and the morning had about gone by and he said, "well, let's go get some breakfast." We tended to get along well. Then he said, "Tom, if we

hire people in Seattle and transfer them to Alaska we usually pay their way and we ship their furniture, etc., but we just don't have the money to do that. So if you want the job bad enough to get yourself to Anchorage, you are hired." So, that is what I did. I moved myself to Anchorage and showed up at the aircraft hangar.

Smitty was a little surprised to find out that he had a new employee. When I came, I met Elsie Hagger and Audrey (can't remember her last name). They were the office staff. We had about five people working in the hangar. The hangar wasn't completely built yet. It was closed in and warm but a lot of things still needed to be done.

It was September 1, 1951, that I went to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service. I had to give notice to Kenmore Air Harbor and then arrange for my wife and I to move north. She was working in a bank down there.

We came up and got an apartment on Government Hill. We were the first ones to live in a brand new little apartment near Elmendorf Air Force Base. We shipped our car up. When I went to work I met Holger Larsen, who was the enforcement man here and Ed Chatelaine, the biologist. They had an office downtown in the basement of the Federal Building. Our offices were out at the Lake Hood facility.

We had airplanes scattered around a little. When I got here, one of the first tasks was to go over to Campbell Airstrip and gather up the pieces of a Monocoup that Joe Meiner and Smitty had crashed on a training flight. We gathered that up and got it back to the hangar.

There was a Fairchild 24 on floats, a ranger-powered one up in Mud Lake, near Big Lake. I didn't know who had put it in there but the engine had failed so we took an engine up in a Widgeon, along with a couple of mechanics, and we changed that engine and brought it back to Anchorage.

That was quite an event because we got the thing all done and we were running quite late in the evening. It was just turning dark and I sized up that whole thing and I thought, well, I'm not going to take off out of here in the dark with this strange airplane with a newly installed motor. I just figured we would go back in the morning and look it over and run it again. It was not a long lake but I was familiar with a Warner-powered Fairchild's so I knew the airplane's performance pretty well, providing the Ranger performed anything like the Warner. Theoretically, it would anyway.

The next morning we went back and we just couldn't believe our eyes. Apparently a black bear had crawled up over the side of the airplane and had gotten on top of the wing and then fell off. He had just ripped and torn the fabric to shreds and he bit a big piece out of the front spar on the right wing. All you could say was that the airplane was just a mess. We taped it all up as best we could and flew it back to Anchorage that day.

Rather than repair this plane, we put it up for sale and sold it. We sold that Fairchild to Tony Schwam, who used to operate Island Air down in Petersburg. He was the airport manager at International Airport at the time. It was not a real desirable airplane.

We were hopeful of getting some new Pacers and Super Cubs and phasing out some of the odds and ends of airplanes. As I looked at our fleet, we had several Widgeons, Gullwings, Stinson L-1's, and a couple of Super Cubs – just quite a varied fleet of airplanes. The thought was to try and get standardized on some new smaller airplanes that are easier to handle on floats and on skis and with more modern engines that perhaps would perform a little better.

After that, we had a Gullwing down south of Kotzebue with an engine failure and Smitty contracted that job out. We didn't go get that one. Somebody got it and brought it out and the fellow that I had met earlier, named Slim Walters, was a Reeve pilot and also a mechanic. He was furloughed for the winter and he came over looking for work so we hired him as "a work as employed" person and he and I went up to Nenana. There was a

Stinson station wagon on floats that had an engine failure and had been pulled up on the riverbank and the engine removed.

By the time Slim and I got there, it was January. There it sat, frozen in on its floats with big snowdrifts all around it, but close to the railroad tracks. We trudged over and shoveled the best we could. There were lots of parts like the cowling and the baffles and things that they had taken off the airplane and piled in the driftwood in the fall. But how to find it in six feet of snow? Slim was very clever. He put on some snowshoes and limbed a long sapling. He had a pole about 2 inches in diameter and about 10 feet long. He would snowshoe along the snowdrift and just probe in the snow. If he got a metallic clink on the end of his pole, then we would dig there and we would find a propeller or a piece of the cowling, or a spinner, or whatever.

Ultimately it took us a week. We had flown up with a Pacer. We had the new engine for the Stinson and our toolbox that was in the back of the Pacer. We were well above the minimum takeoff weight and we put all that stuff in. We found all of the parts, or nearly all of them, enough to get the engine in and running and then we addressed the problem of the floats and getting it out of there. Slim was great. He had a lot of experience in the Arctic and he had a lot of imagination. We had a chain saw and we sawed the ice around the floats. We then wound up with this block of ice the length and the width of the set of floats. We worked some straps under it and borrowed a crane from the railroad and they picked the whole thing up. We lifted the airplane up first and put the wheels on it. They slung it over and put it on the road for us, then they swung the crane back and picked up the floats and swung them over and put them on a flat car.

The agent was saying, “oh, this is going to be expensive.” It was ice about 4-feet thick. Then he said, “well, what do we call these airplane floats, oh, this is going to be expensive.” We asked him how much scrap metal was and he said, “oh, that is just dirt cheap.” We shipped them as scrap metal and luckily, coming through Windy Pass, they got into a warm wind and the ice all melted so by the time they got to Anchorage, it was

just a bare set of floats that didn't weight much at all. Since we shipped them as scrap metal, it costs us very little to get them back to Anchorage.

We just went about getting the airplane converted to skis. I remember meeting a rather burly character. I was working late one Sunday night at the hangar. I had come to Anchorage, thinking the work schedule was really neat, an 8-hour, 5-day a week job. That was not the case, there was just more work to do than you could get done. Well, this Sunday night, I was working by myself, putting skis on a Gullwing Stinson in the hangar. I could get the big double bungees right up to the lug where the hole lines up but then if I took one hand away, the thing would creep down and I couldn't get the bolt in the hole. I was trying to figure out how to get the leverage to hold that bungee up there and all of a sudden, this big arm came over my shoulder and grabbed the thing and put it up and said, "why don't you put the bolt in, son." That just happened to be Jay Hammond. He had come to get the airplane. We went and had dinner and I got acquainted with the guy that was, at that time, a predator control pilot and later became the Governor.

Jim: Who was it that decided on the Pacer? The Pacer's were what really replaced a lot of the funny airplanes. I see you have a picture on the wall of the old Y-L 15, which was an interesting experiment that didn't work all that well.

Tom: We got the Y-L 15's later. The Pacer was about all you could buy in the way of a new airplane. They quit making the Stinson station wagon in the Pacer in the Piper line of airplanes. Piper bought Stinson. They discontinued the 108's so that was what you could get or you could get a Cessna 120 or a 140.

They had just come out with a 170 B and we had one. Lyman Reynoldson had the 170 B and he didn't like it very much. He had a Gullwing before that. Ray Tremblay went down to work with him but before Tremblay went down, there was a guy named Rosie Stidd, who was a big man. Rosie probably weighed about 250 pounds. Lyman was about the same and when you got those two guys in any small airplane, it became pretty crowded. We gave them the 170 B and the performance wasn't very good. It had a little

145 engine and it just wasn't a very heroic airplane at all and carrying wood, sleeping bags, and enough camping gear to exist in the winter if you had a problem, their plane was overloaded all the time.

The 180 hadn't yet come out so we just settled on Pacers. I think we ordered about a half dozen of them. I remember one of the first ones went to Tok. You know, the wind just never blows in Tok and the thing had gotten from the Piper factory to Tok and they tied it down to some full barrels of gasoline. A freak wind like a tornado went through and the next morning the airplane was upside down with the barrels of gas setting on top of the wings. It was just virtually destroyed. We went up and took the wings off and trailered it home and rebuilt it.

The Pacer and the Super cub were identified as being the airplanes that we could afford and that we would use. As soon as the 180's came out, then we immediately stopped buying Pacers. They didn't last long. We were using them kind of like Kleenex. We rebuilt them the best we could but then converted over to the Cessna 180's. The strategy for getting 180's in those days was to get a surplus, twin engine beach craft and bring it up and paint an "N" number and fly it. I think we had to fly it 50 hours or maybe a 100 then we could sell it and use the proceeds to buy a replacement airplane. We were busy fixing up military Twin Beaches and selling them and ordering Cessna 180's. That was the start of the 180 fleet.

Jim: That was really interesting the way it took all these little side ventures to put that aircraft operation in the black. It was really effective. I liked the Pacer. That was the airplane that I started flying in about 1954. We flew them all over the Interior in all kinds of weather, on skis, wheels, and floats. They had their limitations but I always felt like they never let us down.

Tom: The Pacer series had some features that I liked. They were small enough and light enough that you could man handle them a little if you were stuck on floats or skis. They were roomy enough that if you took the back seat out, it made a really nice 2-place

airplane with adequate baggage space to take your sleeping bag and your pack and the stuff that you needed to do your job and survive with. We even put a Fathometer on the floats of one of them. Roger Allen was a sports fisheries biologist and he wanted to make cross sectional soundings of lakes where he proposed to introduce fish. We fixed up a recording Fathometer for Roger and ultimately, we transplanted some graylings from up in the Copper River basin, down to the Kenai Lake. The thing was a great success. I guess, partly, because Roger's pre-transplant research was so thorough. He knew that there was adequate oxygen in the lake and adequate food.

We rigged up a Widgeon with an airflow system. We took exhaust air from a vacuum pump on one engine and separated the oil out, cleaned it, cooled it, and then put it back in the cabin so that we could run hoses up. Roger would catch these big spawning graying and put them in milk cans and we would put them in the airplane and rig a hose down into the water. We would bubble fresh air to them while we were catching some more. When we got a load, we would fly them down to Crescent Lake on the Kenai and release them. It worked great. I don't know that we even lost one fish in the process. They were large fish and they were so ripe that when you would pick them up, ever so carefully, the eggs would spew out of them a little.

Another interesting project that we were involved in was when we had to count the caribou on the Copper River basin and when we counted the moose down on the Kenai Peninsula for Dave Spencer. That was something that I had never done before. It was very, very interesting work. I look back on it as just a golden era in my own life where the airplanes were there and the work was to be done and you had an absolute minimum of hassle with bureaucracy. Occasionally, as a brand new federal employee, I would always get tangled up in the bureaucracy. Just in the first few weeks that I was there, Audrey gave me this tablet with about four different colored pages and carbon paper, etc. She explained that it was to be used to buy things with it. It was called a Standard Form 44, purchase order. She showed me how to fill it out.

A guy came in that was selling brakes for a Grumman Goose airplane. I knew that we only had one up here and that kind of came and went. Clarence came and took it. It needed brakes badly. The original Goose brakes were pretty poor. He was closing out Grumman's stock of brakes. The newer design was a much better brake made for the Grumman Mallard. I told him that we would just take all 12 pairs of those. They were $1,000 per pair. I wrote him a SF-44 for $12,000 and submitted it in the normal channels. Almost immediately, a guy named Frank Rieger was up from the Portland Office explaining that the limit on SF-44's was supposed to be, I think, about $500. He seemed to think that I had a problem with these brakes. It took a little while to reveal to him that I didn't have any problem at all, that I had the brakes. He had a problem paying for them and that he probably should pay for them because we had them!

Jim: Yes, there were lots of stories between the field crews and the administrative offices. He got it straightened out though?

Tom: Oh, yes, they got paid and everything was fine. After that I would phone him before I made any more extraordinarily large purchases and then they would arrange the purchase through the proper mechanisms so it was all in conformance with the handbook.

We did a lot of things a little more casually. I went to Juneau where Alaska Coastal Airlines was a big player. They had a lot of Goose airplanes and they overhauled their own engines. They made them up for salt-water purposes. They eliminated the magnesium parts and put on aluminum accessory cases and they made an engine especially for a Goose. Just with a handshake with a guy named Vennecky(??) I arranged for 12 engines to get overhauled. We would send the engines down to Juneau and they would overhaul them and send them back. That was great. Frank Riegert took care of putting out the contract and administering the thing and we got very good engines and they got paid.

The Fish and Wildlife reputation for paying bills in the City of Anchorage was just terrible. I remember going into an instrument overhaul shop with some instruments that I

wanted overhauled. The owner of the shop, Dick Davies, wanted to just throw me out. He said, "you guys never pay your bills, I'm not going to overhaul any instruments for you." It took a long time to convince Dick that we were his friends and we would, in fact, pay the bills. Everywhere I went, Reeve Air Motive, who sold parts, didn't like us. It took quite a bit of cleaning up of our accounting processes and our payment processes to make the venders a little more happy with us.

Jim: That was my primary dealings with Mud Hole Smith when I was trying to get gas with a government purchase order. It took a lot of persuasion. He took a lot of persuasion, no matter what you wanted.

Tom: What year did you come, Jim?

Jim: I went to work for Holger Larsen in a summer job in 1951, starting out in the basement of the old federal building. I didn't fly then. It was in 1954 before I got checked out in the Pacer.

Tom: You and I came the same year. I came in the fall of 1951. Rachael was Holger's secretary. Holger had a helper or two – Reynoldson and Harry Pinkham. I remember Rachael because she was such an extraordinary pretty young woman and later married and then much later, rented an apartment from me. I knew her over a good many years. She was very fluent in Japanese and she became the first station agent when Japan Airlines decided to serve Anchorage. They hired her immediately because she was so fluent in the language and of course, a very attractive representative at their airline terminal up here.

I remember taking Holger in a Widgeon up to one of the interior mining strips back behind the Talkeetna Mountains and Sushana. He wanted to go there and I could never understand why. It was after hunting season had closed. It was just before snow and freeze-up in Sushana. We went up there and the runway was grown up with brush pretty bad and I looked at it and felt it was doubtful. It was an old, old, somewhat abandoned

runway. Holger said, "oh, the runway is fine, let's land there." We landed and the props were running in the brush! With all the brush against the hull, it was hard to see. We stopped and there were about 5 or 6 old people spending the winter in Sushana. One was Mrs. James and her husband. There was one guy approaching 80 years of age that they called "Sonny" because he was the youngest one in the camp. Holger went in and talked to them about the moose and the caribou. We just had a long visit and we had some coffee and some fresh baked bread. Holger asked them if they had moose meat for the winter. They said, "no, that Sonny tried a couple of times to get a moose but both times, the moose had gotten away and they didn't have any moose meat for the winter."

Harry Boaden(??) was the packer with horses that served them and Harry hadn't made it in with much supplies. Holger just politely excused himself and we went out to the Widgeon. We had seen a pretty good-sized bull moose just off the end of the runway when we landed. He got a rifle out of the plane and went over and shot the moose so that those folks would have moose meat for the winter. He had a reputation of being kind of a flinty enforcement agent. I was just amazed because the season was closed and all the rest but he was going to make sure that group of people had something to eat that winter.

Jim: I think that was the sort of thing that was started by Sam White. I know Ray Woolford, I don't know if he ever shot a moose for anybody, but he would distribute moose meat when people out in the bush needed winter meat. I was with him a couple of times when we would find people with illegal meat. It was clearly illegal but it was obvious they needed the meat so we would just leave it there. I think that had a lot to do with the good reputation that the Fish and Wildlife Service had in those days outside of the merchants in Anchorage.

Tom: I remember patrolling up by Gulkana one winter day in a truck with Ed Chatelaine. We came upon a moose that had been shot on the road and it had been dragged with a car around an old oxbow of road that wasn't being used anymore. The guys had put a tent over it and they were busy butchering this moose in this tent. We came upon them and it was clearly illegal. You couldn't, in those days, shoot within a

mile of the road. This moose had been standing firmly on the road! It was a guy from Valdez. We took the moose. We loaded it up in the truck and took it over to Gulkana and hung it up in the CAA garage. The CAA mechanic was an expert in skinning and disjoining a moose. He had this thing cleaned in nothing flat. He was a long time Alaskan who could dress a moose with a little pocketknife so fast.

We took the guy to court down in Valdez. The Commissioner was a little slender lady, probably didn't weight 90 pounds, with iron gray hair and very, very erect posture. She looked like a soldier – Mrs. Harries. We brought the case before her and this young fellow, who had a wife and children said, "yes, he had shot the moose." She looked at him and she said, "you know I knew every time you spit on the sidewalk since you were born." She fined him a predacious amount of community service, no money, and let him keep the moose. I thought right then that was a great deal of justice in that verdict.

Jim: I remember that lady, she was quite a famous personality in Old Valdez there.

Tom: That was the only time I encountered her but I went away completely impressed.

We did a lot of unusual work like when they were trapping goats here to haul to Kodiak. They wanted to start a herd of wild mountain goats in Kodiak. I came to work one day and I took a Pacer up and landed on a sand bar at the head of Eagle River and picked up these goats. It was the first time I had ever landed off an airport in my life with a wheel plane. I sized it up and decided it didn't look so bad and I landed there. This trapper, indeed, had a mountain goat on a leash just like a dog. He led the thing over to the airplane, bundled it up and put it in and I brought it to Anchorage. We kept it in the hangar, fed it and watered it until we got a couple more and then we hauled them over and put them loose on Kodiak Island. I think, in total, we hauled over about 17. From that start, there are now thousands of mountain goats on Kodiak. They tell me, the full length of the Island, there are goats in abundance and they now have an open season for hunting them.

Gordy Watson and I hauled goats over there one winter day, which was one of the more difficult flights that I have ever made. We finally wound up landing in the Pacific Ocean and taxiing up on a beach to get out of the snowstorm. We spent the night on the beach. We had already delivered the goats and we were on our way back. We were delivering a family with children and pets and household stuff. The Goose was just full. We would sweep the snow off the wings with spruce bows and run the engines from time to time to keep them warn. We took off the next morning. The weather was nice and we came on into Homer and got some fuel and then came on up to Anchorage.

Ed Chatelaine was a pilot in his own right. He had a private certificate. I hauled him around talking to people, talking especially to the Native Alaskans up in the Copper River country. The goal was to try and develop some history of the abundance of caribou and moose in the Copper River basin. The challenge was if you asked a person, "when you were a little boy were there lots of moose?" He would say, "a few" or "many" or "lots." Well, "how many is a 'few' in numbers, etc." Ed worked out a scheme where he understood those people pretty well. He was able to form some kind of an idea how many caribou really had been there in years past; how many moose had been there too.

There was a big argument between Holger and Ed as to how many caribou were there. Holger was wanting to cut back the hunting season to just males and I think, to just one per hunter. Ed was insisting there were a lot and that they would eat themselves out of house and home and that we should open up the season. For a newcomer to Alaska it is hard to tell a male caribou from a female at a distance. Quite often, people would shoot several and sort them out and keep the males and abandon the females. In those days, it was only legal to shoot males and they all have antlers, different sort of antlers, but nevertheless, antlers.

We took at least five Super Cubs and three Pacers and grided the country up. There was a big argument about whether there were 1,000 or 7,000 or how many. We got some really good weather, lots of pilots, and lots of observers. Dave Spencer trained the observers on how to estimate the number in a standing group of animals. There were

about 10 times as many as the biggest estimate anybody had made. There were just lots of caribou everywhere. It was really revealing to me how little valid information we had about the abundance of animals in the country.

Bears, in particular, were hard to evaluate by airplane because they hide. They will get under a bush if there is a bush anywhere nearby when an airplane is in sight.

Jim: The airplanes certainly made a difference in evaluating wildlife populations, all the way from the big game to the waterfowl. It took a few years to figure out how to do it.

Tom: In the summer, my day was always divided between supporting the law enforcement commercial fishery activities and supporting the biological inquiries. I would fly in the mornings. I would usually start around 5:00 – 6:00 a.m. and patrol Cook Inlet on down almost to Kodiak and back around almost to Yakutat, into Prince William Sound for illegal fishing activities. I would try to get back in by 1:00 in the afternoon and refuel. I would then support the field camps of botanists and biologists that were gathering information about how many animals, what their life was like, what do they eat, how much of what they eat, etc.

For awhile, they were shooting a caribou each week and just extracting the digestive tract completely and bringing it in to sort out the food being digested. They were studying how much willow, moss, how many blueberries, etc., that it took to support one of these animals. I thought that was extremely interesting work. We had teams of young people that just walked along with the caribou herd. They just had a little tent and carried their food in their backpack. Everytime they would get near a fairly large lake or a place where I could land, I would then re-supply them with their mail and food. I would take in their products that they were sampling, be it the plants or whatever they were doing that needed to come back to town, I would bring it back for them.

I started with a Ranger Widgeon. We flew the Widgeons with the Ranger engines for about three years and then got some of them converted to the Lycomming engines which gave us a lot better performance. Shortly after that, we began to get some more of the surplus Goose airplanes from the Navy and the Coast Guard. They could haul more and the engines were a little more reliable. I just really enjoyed flying the Goose and I still do. Occasionally I get a chance to fly one here. It is the same airplane, the 703. It is now in private hands. The 789 is over in the museum. It is a flying museum display and once in awhile, I would fly that one.

The museum desperately needs a sponsor, either the city, the state, or some corporation or individual. It doesn't take in enough money from tourists to support itself yet. It is just a wonderful collection of airplanes that made flying possible in Alaska in the early days. I think Ted Spencer has done a fantastic job of gathering pictures and films and the actual hardware and artifacts that were used in those days. It is just incredible that those pilots could do so much with the equipment they had available.

Jim: It is really nice that Ted has that plane identified as a Fish and Wildlife airplane.

Tom: It is back in the same scheme and colors. I remember that one. It was a Navy airplane. One evening about quitting time, we had just finished overhauling the landing gear and the engines and gotten the airplane ready to serve as a Fish and Wildlife airplane. George Brant was the shop foreman then. He looked at the airplane that was camouflaged blue and he said, "Tom, why don't you stay late and we will paint that plane tonight." After everybody went home, we put the orange on it. We could mask that off and the next night we put the black on it, then it was orange and black, exactly the way it is painted today. Somebody sent us some huge decals from Washington, D.C. I think John Ball was head of the Service in Washington as far as airplanes were concerned. These things were just horrible to put on over all those little rivet heads. They were so big. It was really tough to get those decals on without having a bubble under them. They had the decals reproduced in the later years and it now has the decals on it just the way it used it.

Jim: It is interesting that the Fish and Wildlife flying operation hadn't really been reported very much as part of the aviation history in Alaska from the 1930's and 1940's.

Tom Well, it didn't haul the public. The passengers were the employees, the stream guards, the biologists, the botanists, and such and didn't get the public notice that the airlines got. There was a little bit of bitterness from guys like Mud Hole Smith that the federal government should be hiring them to do this flying and not doing it with federally owned airplanes. We tried to be as quite and unobtrusive as we could and yet the relationship was very good.

I hadn't been employed very long and a guy came rushing through the door, a total stranger, and said, "hi, I'm Bud Branham and I need to borrow a Widgeon float." I had noticed in our stock that we had lots of Widgeon floats, some new ones, some used ones in good condition. That sounded all right to me so I went out and got him a servable used float. He said he would get it back to me and thanked me for really saving his neck. He said he dinged his float and he had to take a trip. He went away with a float and in about a month, a brand-new float came from the Grumman Company, addressed to me at the Fish and Wildlife Service. I called him and told him that I thought his new float was in. He said, "no, no, that's your new float, you really got me out of a bind."

The government gained a new float in exchange for an old float just by being helpful to the industry. We traded parts with Northern Consolidated Airlines, with Alaska Airlines and if we had something that they desperately needed, we would loan it to them and they would replace it. If we needed something, they would loan it to us. It was a very good, equitable working relationship, although it didn't meet anybody's handbooks.

Jim: The flyers were all kind of a clique that got along well together and bent the rules for whatever agency or company they were in to help each other get along. That was neat, wasn't it?

Tom: Well, it sure was. The Bureau of Land Management was an independent federal organization. They had a different fleet of airplanes and a different mission but we would help them and assist them during times of forest fires. I don't know that they assisted us much because our busy season and theirs usually coincided. I can remember putting a team of fire control people in a little tiny lake. There was no arrangement made to go and get them. My task that day was to put the guys over near the fire on that little lake. They had considerable difficulty getting them back out of there. It is one thing to land in a small lake but quite something else to haul a load out of a small lake. I could get out by myself just fine. I think they finally used a Super Cub, making about seven trips.

Jim: One of the cooperative things that I remember was I was riding with you in a Goose. We landed at Umiat during the road search and moved into those old Quonset huts there that had been abandoned by the Navy. The only residences there were a couple of Wein radio men. They had a truck and we went and asked if we could borrow the truck to haul our stuff. The guy said, "no, it was a company truck, I can't lend it." That was reported to John Klienbiel in Fairbanks who called up Sig Wein at Reeve's and told him. About half an hour later, here comes the Wein radio man with the truck and said, "you keep the truck, I'll let you know if I need it."

Tom: Those relationships were wonderful. Noel Wein was a very good friend of mine in Seattle before I ever came to Alaska. He had retired and he would come out to Kenmore Air Harbor. Both of his sons, Richard and Merrill would come out and Noel would give them some flight instructions there. He was just a wonderful gentleman, willing to share his experience and knowledge. I was just a young fellow, didn't know what to paint or who to salute. I treasure those memories of working with Noel.

Andy Anderson was the lodge keeper up at Bettles. He was a Wein pilot. He was just a very good friend. He is in the process of publishing a book, written by Jim Reardon. I read a draft of it and it should be a lot of fun to read. Andy was so gracious. When we first went up to Bettles on that search for Clarence Rhode, he dropped what he was doing and rode with me in the Goose for a couple of days. He helped me get acquainted with

the various passes from the south to the north and back and forth and around. He showed me where he had various stashes of gas stored. I just thought the world of Andy and Hanna. They were family to me.

Jim: They always took good care of any Fish and Wildlife people, but also other folks too. That business of helping each other, they helped us a lot when we were up there flying, especially during the cold weather, short days. Whatever Wein said, we could use if we needed it if they weren't using it at the moment – heaters, tools, etc.

Tom: You needed that support and backup. The weather was so hard and the days were so short and the temperatures so extreme, it took special knowledge and insights. I remember a mechanic up there at Bettles named Canuck. He was always willing to help if you had a problem. The CAA's station mechanic, Mac, was always helpful. It was just a fun place to go, I always enjoyed going there.

Jim: I still see Canuck once in awhile. He's pretty much retired. I went skating up in Fairbanks with my daughter a year or so ago and here was this familiar looking guy skating around. He works at one of the air service hangars; goes in 2-3 days a week and does odd jobs for them. I think he is in his 70's now.

Did you ever run into Sandy Hamilton? He is currently a pilot out of Fairbanks.

Tom: I don't think I ever did. The folks in Fairbanks that I knew were mostly Ray Woolford, Ray Tremblay, and Frank Glasier. I didn't fly much up there. I had a few trips to Circle, Circle Hot Springs, and over to Boundary and helped out when they needed a pilot for some reason. The same in Southeast, I would go down and fill in sometimes.

One time, a bunch of us went down in the Twin Beach with John Ball. Our purpose was to take some pilots to the Piper factory where they were taking delivery of Super Cubs and fly them up. Some of us were picking up Grumman Goose airplanes over at Quonset

Point, Rhode Island. Bob Meeks and I went over to Quonset and got two Grumman's to bring us. It was a lot of fun and a great trip.

John loaded us all in the Twin Beach and we went into Mitchell, South Dakota, one black night. We were all curious. We were out of Seattle and wondered why we didn't land at Pierre or some larger airport and why didn't we land a little sooner. It was getting late in the night. About 9:00 p.m. or so, we are looking for the airport at Mitchell, SD, and there aren't any airport lights and no rotating beacons. John said, "well, it's right over there." We made a low approach with our landing lights on and we were just right over a farmer's field. On about the fifth approach, all of a sudden a set of runway lights turned on. Sure enough, there was the runway. We landed and taxied. There were a number of cars there. There were 7 of us in the plane. They took us all to a family's home where they had prepared a pheasant dinner. We had wild rice and pheasant. They had expected John. It turns out that had been his home before he ever joined the Fish and Wildlife Service. That was where he met and married his wife, Margaret. The whole community always turned out when John came to town. It was a delightful evening.

When John came to Alaska, Smitty and Clarence were agitating for more capable airplanes. John came up to just review the kind of work we were doing and to make sure we were doing it safely. We had tried to get a more capable airplane for going out to the Aleutians, particularly to Adak, Amchitka, and Shemya. Bob Jones was worrying about the sea otters and such quite a bit. The day turned out absolutely calm and sunny. You could have paddled a canoe from Anchorage to Amchitka that day! John went away, still wondering why we wanted better airplanes. We were flying the Ranger Widgeon. Ultimately, it helped to convince him that we needed to upgrade the engines. We did get the Lycomming engines.

Jim: I heard you tell a story once about buying fuel in the Pribilofs and determining that it was more practical to buy stove oil than jet fuel because it was all coming out of the same tank.

Tom: That was after I went to work for the CAA which had become the FAA and we got little twin-jet business type airplanes. They were great for flight inspections and we would go in there and buy jet fuel. This truck would come and deliver the jet fuel. I noticed there was only one truck and one storage tank but they sold jet fuel for one price and stove oil for a different price. We started buying stove oil when we needed fuel. Those engines were very good about burning whatever you put in them. Reeve airplanes were burning the same fuel. Everybody that went there with a jet engine was using that fuel. Some of the carriers were using Merlins. The Merlins had a little adjustment on the fuel system allowing you to burn gas, automotive fuel, stove oil, or jet fuel. You would just set the little lever to whatever you were going to burn that day. They had a limited life on the engine if you burned very much gasoline. If you burned kerosene or stove oil or jet fuel, you were in good shape.

Those were fun days. We just treasured them and I guess all of us that participated in the search for Clarence Rhode remember that when it started, we were in kind of a happy frame of mind. We thought Clarence just had a dead battery and we would find him and razz him a little and he would fly the Goose home. It wasn't for several days that we realized that the reality of the situation was very serious and very tragic and that we had lost not only a good friend but a great leader.

Jim: That was a pretty dramatic search. Do you have any more memories of the search?

Tom: I started on the 20th of September. I got to Bettles at night and I searched until the day before Thanksgiving. I searched all of October and half of September and half of November. We searched long and hard. We found little things such as the filters off the cigarettes that he had burned and thrown away. We found several burned cigarettes. He smoked dark brown filter tipped, long slender ones. We found several places where he had apparently stopped to refuel. There were little notches in the beach where the nose of the Goose would just fit in and we would find several of those cigarettes in those areas. We talked to people that were camped at Porcupine Lake who said they had heard the

Goose go over and they heard a loud explosion. We searched and searched and found no evidence of the airplane at all.

--end of Side A, Tape 1—

--start of Side B, Tape 1—

Jim: I think some of what you said reflects back to those days in the 50's. We were all working hard but we were all really enjoying Alaska. It was really a lot of fun and a lot of funny things happened. Can you speak back to some of the amusing things that happened.

Tom: Jim, I think one of the things that I remember very vividly was the fact that everyone, no matter what their role in the Fish and Wildlife Service was, they worked at it on a yearly basis. It was 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If there was work to be done, there was no grumbling, no griping. All the people really pitched in and worked hard. All the folks in the Aircraft Division did. We had a few pilots come and go but mostly we had a pretty stable workforce and as best we could, we maintained those airplanes very well. We had some odd ones. We had the Boeing W-L 15's and they were very short-ranged and very slow but they had exceptional visibility. They were as controllable as a pig on roller skates but they did a certain amount of work. I remember making fuel tanks for them that would extend their range and make them a little more useful to us. They were just under powered to the point of being almost dangerous.

We had good airplanes. We didn't always paint them and keep them pretty but we did always make sure they were very sound and airworthy and flyable. The guys really did a job with them. It was a group of people that I was very proud to be affiliated with. I remember the fisheries guys – Tom Costello, Jack Scarry, Jim Branson – all people who went on to distinguished careers in the interest of the fishery and the wildlife. It was a golden period in my memory and in my life.

I did a lot of unusual things with airplanes. I guess I got stuck a lot. It was a cast system. Like India, we had two casts. One was plastered - the guy in the airplane with his hand on the throttle and the pushers - the guys outside the airplane. Whether it be on skis or stuck in the mud on floats or stuck on the beach with an amphibian, we always had to have pushers. When the airplane would start to move, quite often the pushers would be up to their knees in gooey mud and the tail of the airplane would just mow them like ripe wheat. They would hardly ever complain. They would get in the airplane, and we would go and do the next thing.

Jim: I went through some of that and that was a big inducement for becoming the pilot and to get going with your training.

Tom: In those days, I guess we were a little more generous in our thoughts. If you had a private certificate and reasonable piloting skills, Smitty would check you out and give you an airplane and help you get started. He would teach you how to use it effectively and keep from getting lost any more than you really had to. We even had confiscated airplanes. One that I remember was a little 65 hp Aeronica Chief. To meet the needs of communication we had to put a battery and a radio in it with a trailing antenna and then a little wind-driven generator out on the struts to charge the battery. We used T-30 radios, which were very capable high frequency radios. You could talk, virtually, all over Alaska with them. You used them yourself, Jim.

Jim: Yes, and I have a little story to tell about them. Turning out that trailing antenna, you had to tune the radio with about 25 or 30 turns. That worked fine. It took a little time. There was one of the new Pacers that came up and the reel for the trailing antenna was buried in the upholstery. You would go to reel it out and it would ball up and the only way to fix that was to get landed somewhere. You couldn't do it with one hand and take the thing apart and straighten out the wire and get it going again while you were flying. One time I took off, couldn't get the wire out, landed and took the thing apart and got it straightened, took off and the wire balled up again. I took my pocketknife and slit the upholstery. I could then reach up with one hand in the air and get that silly wire to go

out. I always felt like that when I brought that plane back to Anchorage that you had looked at that blemish on that new airplane aghast!

Tom: I probably did. We tried real hard to keep them looking nice for you fellows. Having the reel submerged was not a good idea.

Jim: Yes, somebody really stitched up a nice patch that left the reel free after that.

Tom: I remember sitting on the ground in Oklahoma City and stretching out the antenna and talking to Clara, loud and clear, here in Anchorage. They were wonderful radios. Bill Lear, the guy that designed the famous Lear jet was individually responsible for designing that radio. You had to have a pocket full of crystals to cover all the frequencies you might want to use but they worked very well.

Jim: One of the interesting things about that period was the wonderful radio communications the Fish and Wildlife Service had. I think there were somewhere around 150 stations in cars, people's kitchens, boats in Southeast, in the Bering Sea, and in the airplanes. The real credit to that was when the Air Force decided to use our radio frequency for the Clarence Rhode search. They put our crystals in their airplanes to run their search.

Tom: We had a much more effective radio network than they did. I guess the highlight in my observation of that system was Clara Evenson cared so much about the radios and the people that she had a Lear 230 installed in her kitchen cabinet at home and antenna up a tree. I recall early one Sunday morning I was out patrolling south of Seldovia, out over the Pacific Ocean. A guy called in from one of our camps up in the Copper River country saying that they had flooded their boat, lost their boat, his partner had drowned and he had just gotten back to camp after about 5 or 6 days of walking and would somebody please come and pick him up because he was hungry and discouraged. I was two hours from there in the Goose and I would have to stop and fuel.

Clara took the message and went across the alley where Roger Allen lived. Roger went out to Lake Hood and got in a Super Cub. On his way to pick up the fellow that had called in from the camp radio, he found the other guy who was still alive and well on the Susitna River. Roger picked that guy up and went up and picked up the one who had gotten back to camp and took the two of them over to Tazlina Lake and bought breakfast for them. I just felt so good. We had those radios mounted in blazo boxes with a reel on the side of the box and we put them out at these camps and put the antennae up in trees. Each time that I would come with the Goose, I would remove the Goose battery and just trade with them. We had two batteries in the Goose and two generators. I would just take their partly discharged battery and put it in the Goose and charge it up and when I got to the next camp, I would trade with them. All day long, I was trading batteries in and out of the Goose to keep the field camp batteries charged up. It just worked great.

We wound up with about 60 of those radios. We bought them used from anybody that had one. They were old radios then but we had a couple of very good repairmen, Loren DeChant, and Hans Weicka(??) and those guys made those radios really work. They made our base station radios and they worked very well. Hans did all of the base stations.

Jim: They don't have the same quality of communication now that we did then.

Tom: Well, we are just entering the satellite communication era and I suspect that is going to be even more wonderful but our high frequency network used to have to relay. Sometimes you would be talking to Cold Bay and they in turn would have to relay your message to Anchorage or Juneau but with all those interested people and the wives of the pilots monitoring a base radio wherever that pilot was based, it was truly a wonderful system. Elsie Tremblay in McGrath was the voice of McGrath. People all over the state of Alaska took care of each other by means of that radio network.

Jim: I remember one time flying on a weekend and it was either Elsie or Millie Pinkham was handling traffic from 3-4 airplanes on a Sunday afternoon. She got on the

radio and apologized and said she was going to have to shut down for half an hour to go to the grocery store.

Tom: We had really dedicated people. I remember one day Elsie came on the air from McGrath and said the roofing was blowing off the residence and the roofing was big sheets of metal roof. Without even thinking, I said, "well keep a cool head, Elsie." She was running around out in the yard, about 8 months pregnant, gathering up these sheets of metal in the howling wind. I just thought it better that she stay in and stay well and not get hurt rather than trying to retrieve every piece of roofing as it blew off.

Those radios just made a terrific amount of difference. One time I was involved in searching for Bob McHaffey down on the south side of the Aleutian Peninsula. The radios allowed us to communicate with Anchorage and let people know what was going on. It was just a dedicated corps of folks who hassled each other for the dollars. I remember the boat folks were always wanting more, we in the airplanes wanted more money, and there was only so much money but everyone was actually very generous and supported the aircraft division. It was a learning, building experience.

Most of our material was surplus, and a large part of our airplanes were surplus, but they served us pretty well. The L-1's were really unusually good performers and then we got into the Goose and the Widgeon airplanes. The American public got good value for the money they had invested in purchasing those airplanes.

Jim: One thing that I thought important at that time, was that every once in awhile, something would happen in the airplane while you were in the air. I remember one time in cold weather, the windshield cracked in the Pacer. Then there was the time I got the wheels stuck in the Cessna 180. I had one set down and one set up. There was another time when I developed a bad engine in the Beaver and it turned out that it had swallowed a valve. I managed to stagger it back into Bethel.

In each of those instances, I was in the air and I was worried but I was able to talk to a mechanic here in Anchorage about my problem. It was either Jerry Lawhorn or Smitty, or yourself. That was just a wonderful service. There is no equivalent thing now that I know of; to be able to talk to a friendly, knowledgeable voice when you have a worry in the air.

Tom: The whole organization was oriented to serving the American public. That's who our employer was. We just did the best we could with the equipment that we could find or scrounge or purchase. We got a good foundation laid, perhaps, for the future generation to understand a little of the history of the fisheries, the birds, the waterfowl, the game animals and the population of animals in Alaska.

Jim: We hear so much about the evils of federal mismanagement with regard to wildlife and fish that a lot of people in more recent times begin to believe that stuff. It's all used for political purposes. I was looking through one of the last Game Commission reports of 1960. There was a letter in there from Bill Egan, the first Governor of the State of Alaska. It was to the Alaska Game Commission, the four Commissioners, thanking them for the wonderful job that the Game Commission had done in serving the wildlife and fish of Alaska so that it was in good shape when the State took over. That is pretty interesting. That is a concept that isn't expressed very often but it was true, it was in good shape.

Tom: I think any enforcement organization starts out with a great handicap. My first trip in a Fish and Wildlife amphibian down to Seldovia, I taxied up on the beach and parked the airplane and got out. I was walking down the boardwalk. We wore a uniform in those days, kind of an Alaskan tuxedo with a coat and pants and an emblem on the shoulder. There were two small children, about 10-11 years old, that came along and one of them said, "Fish Hawk" and spit on me. That was the regard that we were held by the kids in that community. They had to get this from their parents, of course.

It wasn't long after that, that I participated in a couple of events. One was a medical evacuation of a woman from Kalgin Island and another was we were patrolling off shore and we came upon a fishing boat just running in tight circles at quite high speed with no one visible on board at all. I thought that this was really strange so we landed. Bill Shea was the enforcement agent. I was able to get the Widgeon right behind the boat and then add a little power. I put the nose of the Widgeon right against the stern of the boat and Bill jumped onto the boat and shut it down. The operator was down in the bilge's. The cuff of his sleeve had caught on a coupling on a drive shaft and had ripped his clothing off and he had gone around the drive shaft several times. He was very badly injured. Both legs were broken and both arms were broken, his ribs were broken. We didn't know if he was really going to live or not. We got on the radio and there was a Libby's tender nearby and they came over. We took a fire ax and chopped a plank right out of the galley wall on that tender and put it down in the bilge. Bill Shea was pretty savvy. He wrapped this man with many, many wraps around that plank and then we picked him up and rolled him over and put him in the Goose and flew him to the hospital. He survived and became a very good friend, Norman Neilson was his name.

When the word got out that we weren't there just to make life miserable for them but to help, our acceptance by the public was a lot better. We made other good friends such as Clem Tillion, who later enjoyed the name of a politician as well as a fisherman and became part of the U.S. Treaty Negotiation Team for high seas fisheries. I met a lot of very interesting people and enjoyed working with them. We flew the commissioners around and participated in the trials of some of the people. We would occasionally have to go fly a witness back into a trial and participate in what we saw and what had occurred. We tried to reduce the poaching of the fishery and also occasionally in the game area. It was challenging, interesting work and there was never ever a dull moment.

Jim: We have covered a lot of neat stuff and good times – none of it boring! I can't help thinking that rescues were quite a normal occurrence. I suppose there were dozens of people that were assisted, maybe not as dramatically as the story you just told, but sick

babies hauled from trapping camps to town, people picked up along damaged equipment. The Service had a lot of good friends as well as our critics in those days.

Tom: Yes, and we got a lot of help from people when we needed it. As a new pilot here, I was helped by experienced people who would tell me, "Tom, this is the way you do this, otherwise you are not going to be with us very long." The best way to get experience is to listen to the people who have already solved the problem that you are approaching.

Jim: Even some strange ones – we had Cliff Fairchild in Fort Yukon in court one winter. He got fined for an out-of-season moose and later that day, we were trying to get the airplane started. It wasn't working good and Cliff came over with a bag of tools and helped us get the problem fixed and we left. His standards as a pilot was being helpful to other pilots regardless of other aspects of his life.

Tom: We had several enforcement cases involving the fish traps here in Cook Inlet. They were tough. The traps were in boulder-strewn beaches and to get in and make the case and serve the notices was not easy. One time in Seldovia, I was walking down the boardwalk and this seaman asked me, "are you the pilot of the Goose?" He just happened to be the captain and the owner of the fish tender "Westward" which was the prettiest and most effective of all of the tenders in Cook Inlet. He said, "my name is Gene Mason and it really puzzles me as how you can get into those traps through all those boulders and not wreck your airplane." I said, "well, Gene, you are picking up the fish from those same traps and how you can get this great big boat in there is really remarkable." He said, "anytime you can tie up the airplane and you want to come along on one of my fish runs, you are welcome." In fact, I did. I tied up the airplane and went on board the Westward and rode all day and all night with them. I really built a bridge of understanding between the fishery people and the enforcement people.

Jim: Tom, talk a little more about how you managed to get the evidence on an illegal fish trap. Albert Day, on his recording, mentioned preventing fish violations and Smitty

has but no one has really described how it was to identify and apprehend an illegal fishing trap.

Tom: It was not difficult, most of the time at least. When the trap was closed, there was an overlapping set of metfaces that were rolled together and sealed with a trap seal. The seal had to be on there during the closed period. Some of the guys were pretty clever. They would figure out how to unroll the bottom so way down deep in their trap, the fish could still get in and be trapped. Up at the surface, the seal would show as we flew by. It was a metal seal and we could see it. We would fly by at about 50 feet and just look. We soon learned that you looked down the face of those leads and you could see that they were spiraled and not closed properly. The problem then was to land and arrest the trap watchman and take them to court. They were quite compliant, agreeable people. They never resisted or complained too much. The attitude was generally "well, you caught me fair and square, so let's go." Usually, the fine was a very small percentage of what they had gained by fishing illegally anyway. If you had caught $6,000 worth of salmon and the fine is $75, well it wasn't too bad of a day anyway.

Jim: Those trap watchmen sometimes had a little shack right out on the trap and other times they had a shack on the beach.

Tom: Here in Cook Inlet, the shacks were up on the beach most of the time. Our traps were piling traps; we didn't have any floaters. In Southeast, the traps were mostly floaters and in that case, the trap watchmen's little house was right out by the pot where the fish were in the trap. There were a lot of ways of looking at things but the traps delivered the fish whole and alive to the tender and the tender would deliver them almost always within 8 hours of picking them up. The fish hadn't been on the beach in the sunshine or hadn't been picked at by the sea gulls or any of the other things that deteriorated the quality. I think the reputation that wholesome food for canned salmon was made in the days of the traps. The quality of the food delivered to the purchaser just deteriorated enormously when the traps were banned. It didn't distribute the wealth to the population very well because the trap owners were wealthy large companies. It sure

provided better food. It was an easily regulated way to fish. It was either open or it was closed and that was that.

I did a lot of flying in those trap days and it really made you fly the airplane. You had to get real low and go real slow and very close in before you could see what was going on. It was interesting. I had a problem with law enforcement the whole time. One time I remember the most when I was coming back from Kodiak over the Kenai Peninsula. It was a bright moonlit night with some patches of fog around. We looked down in a particular little lagoon and there was a fishing boat fishing inside the lagoon which was absolutely illegal. Not only that, it was a closed season. They couldn't have legally fished outside the lagoon either on that particular night. We thought about that a little bit. I was with an enforcement agent and we thought that we just couldn't let this go by.

The moon was bright enough that I thought I could see the logs and things so I landed outside the lagoon and coasted over the bar with both engines shut off. Then we just drifted into the lagoon. We heard a little rattle. The Goose actually went over the cork line of the net. Pretty soon, the fishermen are pulling in the net and they have caught a Grumman Goose! It was just an open and shut case. They had a lot of fish in the fish hold of the boat and they were busily fishing when we apprehended them. You could say that these were really flagrant violators and this is as bad as it gets because if they catch all the fish in that stream, the stream will be sterile and it won't produce fish any more. It is real easy to fish out a small creek.

So you take them to court and you find out that the captain of the boat is 13 years old and the deck hands are 12. The cannery owner who gave them the boat and told them where to go and what to do said, "oh, they stole the boat." So here you are, looking at a felony on a minor child and you wonder if this is really the business that you want to be in. Actually, it was the cannery operator that was guilty. The kids were just doing what they were told to do. They were very capable youngsters. They had been fishing virtually all their lives. There were a lot of mixed emotions involved in that work in those days.

Jim: I don't think it is the same anymore so much. You don't hear of the commercial fishermen working out ways to get around the regulations like they used to.

Tom: Well, I suspect they still do. They just do it differently with miles and miles and miles of mist net out in the ocean catching the salmon that are still offshore. They are working in the donut hole up where the Russian territory and the American territory don't quite meet. There is an international body of water there that is very busy with Polish and Taiwanese and all kinds of fishing boats other than American.

Jim: Yes, that is a different ball game altogether than the salmon fisheries along the coast.

Tom: In my limited understanding of things, I think that the salmon should be fished at the ocean juncture with each river, then you would have a way to measure how many fish went up that river to spawn. If you catch them all out in the middle of the ocean, you don't know if they are Russian salmon or American salmon or Japanese salmon or what river they were going to. There is no way to assure an adequate spawning to perpetuate the fish.

Jim: You have to wonder if the salmon are going to be able to survive long enough for us to get around to doing that.

Tom: Jim, I've probably taken up enough of your time, but I really appreciate this opportunity to communicate with the rest of the crew that are trying to develop this history of the Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska.

Jim: I think it is great that you had time to sit here today and do this. You will get the transcription back and get a chance to embellish things and eventually, somebody will put the whole thing together, I hope. Thank you, it was fun.

--end of interview—

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